



History and Cultural Background

There is a wonderful origin myth that tells us of a chimpanzee who originally had the first drum, and of a hunter who trapped the chimpanzee drummer. From that day forwards chimpanzees would beat their chests instead of the drum in anger of the theft.

Association of the Djembe is originally with the Numu, the blacksmiths, within the Mandinka tribe of West Africa and the general initial spread of the instrument was in line with the Mali Empire. Somebody who plays a Djembe is called a Djembefola and there are no historical restrictions on who could learn to play the Djembe, unlike some other instruments that were sometimes reserved for the storyteller-historians known as Griot.

The Griot and Griotte have an important role in communities as they are well versed in the histories, the songs and contemporary events. They often specialise in other instruments such as the Kora or the Balafon. Over the years it was a role that was taught specifically to individuals, often within a family, and they would usually marry with other Griots instead of outside of the acquired role. In more recent times, however, rules are relaxing and some characters like Youssou N'dour have distinct links back to a Griot approach. Internationalism has seen some griot move to other countries to spread the word and knowledge of Africa around the world, such as Papa Susso. Griot learning establishments have also appeared which allow non-Griot family individuals to become one, although many of these focus more upon musical skill than the oral histories.

- **Context and delivery**

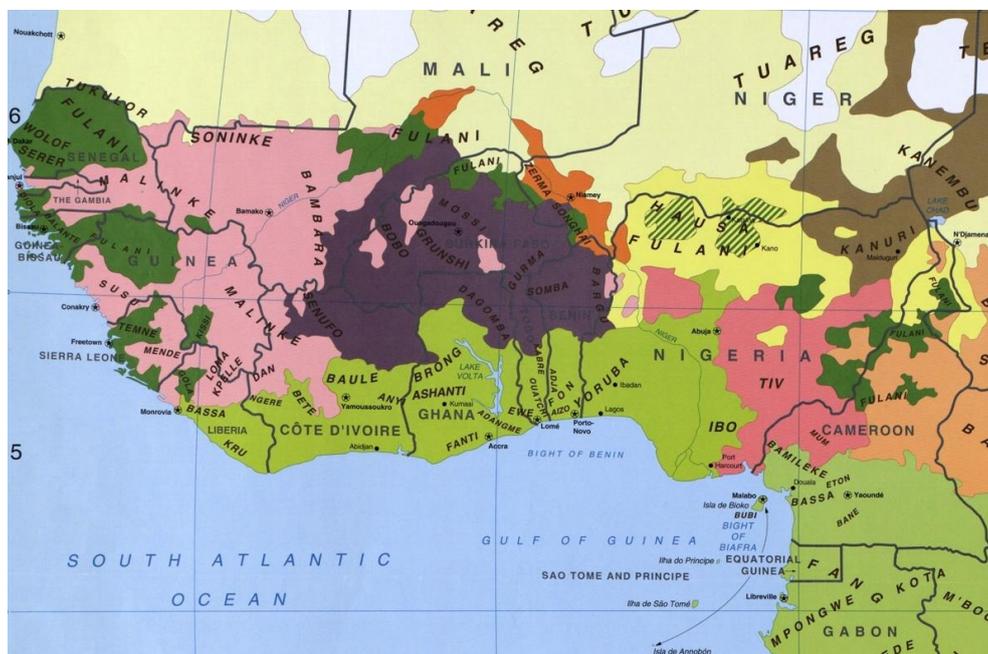
Djembe music is ingrained into the daily life and culture of a traditional village in rural areas. Villages would drum to celebrate all sorts of things including dignitaries visiting, weddings, funerals, a successful hunt, a ritual fishing day and so forth. Everyone takes part in some respect and if you aren't drumming or singing then it is likely that you are dancing.

This sort of approach and performance in the villages is referred to as 'Rural' style as it is what they do in the more rural areas. Within the village they tend to form a big circle or square and perform within it.

As time moved on, travelling drumming troupes became an established concept and would perform for specific arranged audiences, often with a troupe of associated dancers. This is referred to as 'Ballet' style and is usually performed on a stage or at the end of a building or hall. Hotels and other establishments may also hire a troupe to entertain guests in tourist districts.

- **West Africa, tribal influences**

As a sweeping generalisation, each general tribal area will have developed its own take on performance and set rhythms according to their culture. With the spread of interest in the styles of music and freedom of travel it is likely that the lines between these will blur over time, but alongside more recent documentation of rhythms in writing and amateur video documentation it appears that different areas have some distinctions; some are more upbeat, some steady, some complex, some minimal.



Source: Public Domain image from the Library of Congress, via Wikipedia [here](#).



It isn't entirely useful to think of an area as being in line with country borders, as over time people and groups moved, spread out, blended and travelled and original tribal areas are not necessarily strictly in line with the modern borders that we see on maps today.

Different areas also favour certain drums or combinations of drums together. Other instruments such as the [Balafon](#) and [Calabash](#) may be incorporated.

- **Reasons for drumming in the villages**

Music is very important to West African villages. Every important event has designated rhythms that are to be performed. The entire village gets involved and it brings the community together.

An excellent short documentary that is worth watching is called [Foli; There is No Movement Without Rhythm](#) which gives a wonderful snapshot into life in a Malinké village and how rhythm forms both the work and the play that the people engage in daily.

- **Influences on other cultures**

West African rhythm has significantly influenced waves of music in North and South America (and consequently the rest of the world) in large part due to trafficking slaves. The one advantage of relying on a system of music that isn't written down is that the music itself is memorised, and in these new climes that the slaves found themselves in, the rhythms came out and developed in new ways.

In North America the most well-known development is Blues. Vocally, many songs that accompany the drumming have lines repeated and some follow an AAB structure that we now find common place to the blues. The swing rhythm falls in line with some of the traditional 12/8 rhythms, but swung rhythms had clearly been around in North America for years before this. [Bending notes whilst singing](#) may have also come from the African approach to singing these melodies.

Many slaves traded by Portugal ended up in Brazil, a significant amount into Rio de Janeiro. There is evidence of [Candomblé](#) being merged with Catholic Church celebrations to create carnival and other celebrations with heavy dance elements that in turn required strong 2/4 rhythms, which will have drawn influence from Western Africa again. Over time Samba and its variations were given form as we know it today.

[Afro-Cuban music](#) contains significant influence from West Africa, especially in relation to polyrhythms, cross-rhythms and the concept of performance in a social environment.

The Caribbean has also seen influence, especially in Jamaica where in particular [Nyabingi Djembe Drumming](#) sees rhythms from West Africa used and adapted to support a more syncopated feel in conjunction with Reggae-style vocals. The music is much slower than West African Djembe performances in general, but allows for lots of space between beats to allow little improvisations and additions to be thrown in. The social performance element is also retained.

